# A Christmas Assembly Of Cousins

*By ALICE LOUISE LEE.*



THE prospect of spending Christmas eve and part of Christmas day at "the hospitable Pines" in Bixby was not especially pleasing to me; but, since cousins of the Welch persuasion are few and far between, I did not feel justified in refusing Cousin Clara's invitation. Besides that, Bixby was only a few miles distant from Mayville, where I expected to put in a more or less painful season Christmas evening.

Therefore I wrote Clara that I'd arrive on the 5:30 train Christmas eve and remain with her until 4 o'clock the following afternoon. In this connection I mentioned neither my destination after 4 o'clock nor any prospective delight there.

Truth to tell, in my thoughts I was leaving that evening call as far as possible in the keeping of Providence, realizing from past experiences that the atmosphere of Mayville had a curiously unnerving effect on me. The only preparation I had made was to secure a Christmas offering in the shape of a very small gold band carrying a handsome diamond and engraved inside with the (to me) musical name "Rey Day."

"But whether it will ever see the rays of day," I said aloud, grimly punning as I stuffed the tiny box into my pocket, "remains to be seen, as she must take with it such a big blunderer as myself. Oh, for a slice of Harold's assurance!" I added, catching up my umbrella and running for the street car.

Harold Welch was my cousin and the "other man in the case." I did not love my cousin, but then we were even there.

"I wonder," I thought as I raced across the platform and sprang on the already moving express, "if Clara has invited Harold?"

Ten minutes later my question was answered in the person of that gentleman himself strolling leisurely down the aisle of the smoker.

"What a deucedly well set up fellow!" said a man behind me to his seat mate. "Looks as if he had walked out of a bandbox, doesn't he?"

Harold's appearance was always of the bandbox type, but I well knew that his actions were not always, and Miss Day—

"Hello, Rob!" he cried, surprised, but not any better pleased than myself at the meeting. "Going down to Clara's?"

I emerged from behind my newspaper long enough to nod. "Yes. Are you?"

He did not reply at once. He was taking my measure, as usual, with an air of quizzical, galling amusement. The cad has a way of making me realize my inconvenient length, the inferiority of my tailor and the cowlick that adorns the right side of my hair. His eyes wandered upward to the rack over the seat and lodged on my high hat, the first I had ever indulged in, while over his face spread a grin which made comments needless.

Then he replied carelessly: "Oh, yes, I shall get around to the Pines on the 10 o'clock train in the morning. Please tell Cousin Clara, will you, and give her my regards? Tonight"—he threw the chill inducing remark at me over his shoulder as he moved away—"I go on to Mayville."

Mayville! The blood pounded at my temples and burned my face. "It's all up with me," was my solemn thought as I searched my pockets for my match case. My fingers encountered the tiny jeweler's box. Ruefully I pressed it—poor useless little trinket—and looked out of the window at the weather.

I could not have looked at anything less calculated to impart consolation. There was a storm on, a driving storm of sleet, rain and snow, with a heavy leaden sky overhead and shoe deep mud underfoot, the outer world, especially that part of it containing Bixby being an exact counterpart to my feelings.

I had never seen Bixby before, and I think one view would satisfy any reasonable person. It consists of a small unpainted station set down unprotected in the midst of the river flats tempting all the winds of heaven, and I discovered the moment I had set foot on the platform that none of the winds was resisting temptation. An infant cyclone wound the tails of my long coat firmly around my knees and forced me to hang on to my tall hat with a death grip, all of which graceful maneuvering Harold was viewing with relish from a window of the rear car.

As the train rushed on down the valley I whirled around and around to liberate my legs from the embrace of my coat tails, at the same time viewing the nearby landscape in search of proper means of locomotion to the Pines. Saving my own patent leather shoes, none was in sight.

From the station a road wound back among the foothills garbed in gaunt, sighing pines, which concealed any signs of the hospitality underscored in Clara's note. It was certainly the most unpromising looking landscape ever viewed under the wings of night.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" I ejaculated in exasperation.

"It seems to suit ye better to be blowed," came a voice from the doorway, where I discovered the station factotum shedding the light of his grinning countenance on my gloom.

Just then, beguiled by a treacherous lull in the storm, I removed my anchoring hand from my hat and raised my umbrella, still straining my eyes up the road. "Where in thunder"— I began, but got no further. Down swooped the wind and, with an exultant howl, tore my unanchored hat from my head and tossed it over the river bank, at the same time turning my silk umbrella inside out with an ominous snapping of the slender ribs.

The station agent backed into the room. "Better come inside," he suggested affably, "before your hair gits tired of hangin' on to your head."

"Well, I am in a predicament!" I exclaimed, acting on his advice and looking around the little station in search of my baggage, sent on an earlier train.

"Must have gone on," said the agent, seating himself on one corner of the table which contained the telegraph instruments. "Ain't none been toted in here today. I'll telegraph for it," he added consolingly, "and you'll likely git it back in the course of a couple of days."

In view of the next evening that was indeed the consolation of Job's comforters. "Two days!" I exclaimed, horror stricken. "See here! I've got to have it by tomorrow afternoon."

The agent grinned, taking uncomfortably accurate measure of me. "M-um, I understand," he mused, kicking the table leg. "Girl in the case. Don't know where you'll find any girl in Bixby, except," meditatively, "at the Pines."

Girls at the Pines! Involuntarily my hand sought my mop of wind dishevelled hair, seeing which the agent grinned and resumed, "Hired girls they be, but that Betty's a beauty."

"I am a cousin of Mrs. Smith," I began, with dignity. "She wrote me she would meet me at the station."

The agent shook his head. "She can't be in two places at once."

"What do you know about it?" I demanded.

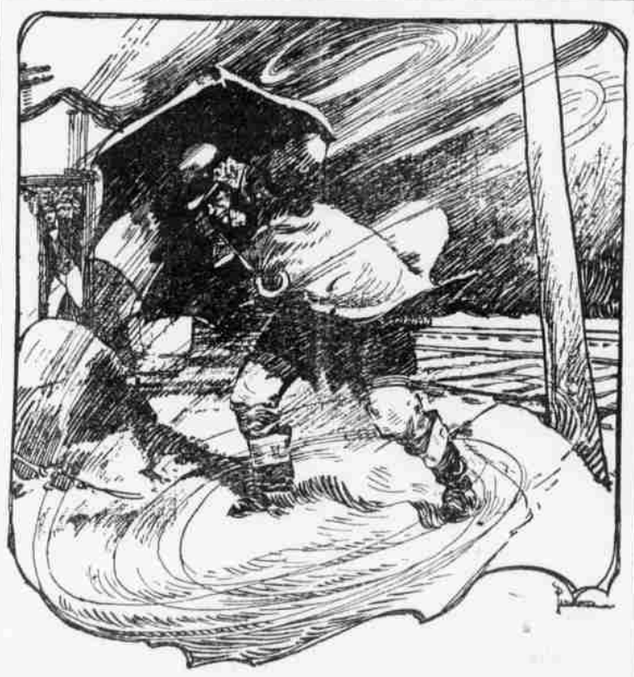
"She went across the river this afternoon to Mayville and hain't got back yet. Roads are awfully heavy. Guess you'll have to hoof it up the hill."

"Something of a foregone conclusion, that is," I returned grimly, shivering as a fresh outbreak of storm shook the station.

Suddenly a sheepish grin overspread the agent's face. He arose and opened a door behind him, speaking without looking back: "See here, now, I'll tog you out to get up there if you'll promise to speak a good word to Betty for me—sort of recommend me, you know. Whenever I see 'er myself my tongue gets into such a darned mixup with my teeth that I can't get a word out."

I looked eagerly over his head into the closet. "Recommend you to Betty? Well, that I will—you can bank on that—if you'll get me out of this hole."

He did his best, but the results were certainly not gratifying to my vanity, the agent running mainly to breadth, while I run to height. His rusty derby encountered the tops of my ears, while his raincoat missed the skirts of my topcoat by a good foot, and his rubber boots, inside of which my trousers were tucked, rubbed up and down on my heels with maddening persistence.



"NOW," HE DIRECTED, "JUST FOLLOW YOUR NOSE UP THE ROAD A SPELL."

Stuffing my shoes into the raincoat pockets, I grappled with the agent's enormous cotton umbrella, calculated, as he observed with pride, to keep a ten acre lot dry under a cloudburst.

"Now," he directed succinctly from the door, "just follow your nose up the road a spell till you come to a lot of lights. That's the Pines. Go in and hang them boots over the kitchen fire to dry out while you tell Betty that I send a merry Christmas and would be darned glad to send her something more if I dared."

I promised and started out on a road beset by as many difficulties as ever encountered Bunyan's Christian. In that wind my great umbrella acted like the sail to a rudderless ship. It toppled me into a mudhole one moment and tumbled me over a projecting stone the next, the ballasting boots being at no time able to keep in line with my head. Moreover, I discovered presently that the statement concerning the ten acre lot was pure fiction, the umbrella containing as many holes as the agent's conscience.

Also I discovered after a half hour's tramp that the Pines did not contain a "lot of lights." There was only one visible, and that but a faint glow in the rear of the gabled porticoed pile which loomed up before me, shuttered and dark, just as I had proved beyond a doubt that the curious sucking sound which arose at every step came from water inside rather than outside those boots.

"A pretty reception this to give an invited guest," I muttered wrathfully, thinking of Harold, well groomed, dry and comfortable, by this time in Mayville and—perish the thought—taking dinner, it might be, with the Days!

Jerking the gate open with unnecessary vigor, I sought the kitchen by way of the back walk and an invisible wire clothesline. This instrument of mutilation took me on the point of the chin, knocking my teeth shut before I could remove my tongue to a place of safety and, scraping backward violently, came to rest against my Adam's apple. When I had righted myself and made sundry remarks appropriate to the clothesline and soothing to my wounded feelings I stumbled up the back steps and applied my knuckles to the door with a force which evidently startled the inmates of the kitchen.

For an instant silence greeted my demand for a hearing; then a hearty voice with a Hibernian accent arose from within: "And sure, me darlin', ye needn't be afraid to open th' door. Bedad, with th' hammer I'll attind to his case!"

Some one approached the door, and a faint and tremulous voice asked, "W-who is it?"

A blast of snow laden wind whirled up under the cotton umbrella, boxing my numbed ears and plastering a soft application on the nape of my neck.

"I am Mrs. Smith's cousin!" I shouted.

"Arrah he is, is he?" cried the Hibernian voice. "Lave him give th' color of his hair, thin!"

The other voice was uplifted in the strange inquiry, preferred in weak tones, "What is the color of your hair, please?"

Under ordinary circumstances instead of replying to such impertinence I would not have stood upon the order of my going, but with that storm assailing my back and the brim of the derby directing a gentle stream inside my collar I swallowed my ire and answered meekly, "Brownish, verging into a golden red."

"Arrah!" came Bridget's triumphant tones. "He ain't th' wan she's lookin' for, Betty, my dear! Lave him out in th' storm, th' desaver!"

I suspect the wail of the storm was in my voice as I raised it in protest. "I have in my pocket a note from Mrs. Smith which will prove beyond a doubt that I am expected."

Again there was a pause. "That sounds all right, Bridget, and if Mrs. Smith has invited him"—here the remarks were directed at me—"if I let you in will you promise solemnly on—on your honor"—

"Whist me, darlin'," came in a stage whisper, "sure, and it's dootful if he's got inny!"

I strangled a laugh as the other finished bravely—"on your honor that you'll go away quietly if you are not Mrs. Smith's cousin."

"I promise," I replied confidently.

The bolt was slipped back, the door opened, and I, furling my huge umbrella, stepped inside, the mud dripping from my coat and a drop of blood falling from my scraped chin.

I certainly presented a strange appearance, but no stranger than the scene into which I had projected myself. In the middle of the room stood a scowling Bridget, her muscular arms bared to the elbows, a poker in one hand and a long handled hammer in the other. Peering over her shoulder was Betty, large eyed and trembling, but undeniably worthy of the agent's encomiums on her good looks.

I shut the door, backed up against it and removed the derby from my head respectfully, whereupon Bridget's severe face relaxed, and Betty, venturing from her refuge, demanded my credentials.

"The letter you promised to let us see," she faltered.

Laying the derby on the floor beside the umbrella, I began a prolonged search under the suspicious scrutiny of four sharp eyes. It was nervous work. My garments collectively boast thirty-five pockets, all more or less inhabited by divers articles. After a fruitless inspection of twelve I became embarrassed. As I replaced the contents of the twentieth and no means of identification appeared a feeling of guilt stole over me. At the twenty-fifth Bridget flourished her hammer and scowled.

"Arrah, Betty, he's a liar! There, ain't hide nor hair of th' letther on him, bedad!"

It was true, as the thirty-fifth pocket proved, but I would not give up.

"You promised"— began Betty, but I temporized, listening to the storm outside.

"If you will kindly allow me to dry my feet in the oven," I begged, an apprehensive eye on the hammer, "I'll go through my pockets again. I'm sure the note is with me."

Bridget, seeing my wholesome respect for her weapons, relented, and presently Betty presented me with a pair of socks, red, but dry, just as I had become aware of another calamity—only one of my shoes remained to me. The other had dropped through the bottomless raincoat pocket somewhere on the road.

Bridget grinned, evidently realizing my general dejection, and without stirring from her position in the middle of the floor kicked off one of her slippers frayed and down at the heel. "Take 'im that, me darlin'. A foine mate it 'ull be to his wan shiny shoe."

I received her contribution submissively and was stooping to put it on when an overloaded pocket seized the opportunity to disgorge two trim boxes, one long, one a tiny cube.

As they rolled over on the floor Betty pounced on them, and at once my character and dark mission stood revealed. "Mis' Smith's spoons," she shrieked, "the new ones that she had marked with her initials last week! Oh, Bridget, however did he break in?"

"The thafe!" cried Bridget.

Now, those six spoons, solid silver, I purchased and had engraved that very morning as a Christmas gift for my ungrateful, unhospitable cousin, but neither Betty nor Bridget would listen to the truth concerning either the spoons or the ring which Betty next uncovered.

"THE LETTER YOU PROMISED TO LET US SEE," SHE FALTERED.

"Rey Day," she read in horror stricken tones, while Bridget, ever keeping a restraining eye on me, reiterated, "Oh, th' thafe!" at the top of her voice.

"Now, see here," I began, "listen to reason, will you?" But at that instant Bridget's gaze fell on the umbrella, and my last hope for mercy flickered and went out.

"Betty, me darlin', see th' umbrelly," she howled. "It's Misther Cross' sure, and this miserable thafe has made off with it from th' station."

Betty at once fell foul of the umbrella with blushing cheeks, while Bridget turned on me, taking a firmer grip on poker and hammer.

"Now, be gone, ye sphalpine! Ye lyin', thavin' scoundrel, show us the bottoms of yer boots directly."

"Alas," I returned without moving, "I have none to show, but I do have a message from this same Mr. Cross, provided he's the station agent, to Miss Betty."

Betty blushed still more deeply, but tossed her head independently. After a moment, however, she glanced over her shoulder and challenged, "I don't believe a word of it."

"As surely as I sit here," I declared solemnly, "he intrusted a message to me and made me promise to deliver it," and then I stopped.

Bridget came a step nearer. Betty bent forward eagerly. "Out with it!" commanded Bridget.

I hunched down comfortably in my chair and spread my hands over the hot stove. "Not one word more until morning," I declared firmly. "In the morning I'll tell you."

Bridget and Betty retired to a corner and consulted, Bridget's face being turned in my direction still. Fragments of the conclusion reached me—"The barn—sleigh robes—till they come home"—

It was Betty who explained the connection between these incoherent remarks, and it was evidently Betty who had persuaded Bridget to harbor me on the premises if I would submit to the conditions—namely, leave the stolen goods with her and Bridget, betake myself to the barn, desist while there from smoking and be quiet until Mrs. Smith should return and admit me to the house or not, as she wished.

"If," as Bridget grimly added, "ye ain't legged it monny a mile away thinkin' of th' prison bars!"

I had given my promise; therefore I submitted and ambled forth in slapping slipper and patent leather shoe, while behind me came Bridget, fully armed, and beside her Betty holding the lantern, which cast my shadow immense and grotesque, with the old derby resting on my ears and the agent's raincoat flapping about me. At the last moment Betty had allowed me the protection of the agent's umbrella, "so long as it is his worst one," she explained to Bridget.

Betty unlocked the barn door and, rolling it back, pointed to a sleigh just inside the door. "There are robes in the sleigh," she said, "so you needn't freeze." Then she came quite close and spoke low, "And I hope you're not a thief and will be here in the morning."

"My mortal frame will certainly be here," I answered solemnly, climbing into the front seat of the sleigh, "but whether it will be in a limber or solidified condition only the morning will reveal."

The door was rolled back again, and I was left in darkness to wrap myself up as best I could in the fur robe, under whose warmth I laughed at the late unpleasantness. Finally I dozed off, with the comforting reflection that no one but Clara would know of my predicament and that I could get outfitted some way on the morrow in time to fulfill my engagement in Mayville.

Alas for the best laid plans o' mice and men! It was 10 o'clock perhaps when I was aroused by a confusion of sounds outside the door—voices, the crunching of wheels and loud laughter.

"Stolen spoons!" I heard in a familiar voice. "This is the richest joke I ever got on to. Now, show up the contents of the other box—the little one."

The little box! My hair arose under the derby. It was Harold's voice, and how in thunder—

Back rolled the door again, and in drove a closed carriage, the side lights blinding me. Following the vehicle came Betty and Bridget, the former tearful, the latter defiant, still lugging her hammer and poker.

"Merry Christmas, Rob!" roared Harold, dismounting from the carriage, immaculate, dry and uncreased. "Behold him, Clara, Bridget's tramp and thief!"

Hugging himself in glee, he proceeded to prance around the sleigh, viewing me on all sides, while the coachman, repressing bursts of unseemly mirth, watched me out of the tail of his eye.

Clara, laughing hysterically and clutching the spoons in one hand, gave me the other, explaining as best she could between her convulsions of merriment: "We stopped at the house, and the girls told us of your plight. Oh, I'm so sorry, but I had to go to Mayville, and there I found Harold and brought him back with"—

The rest was lost on me, for slipping out of the vehicle, something held tightly in her hand, was Rey Day. For one awful moment I prayed the floor to open beneath me, for no man would willingly appear ridiculous before the one woman in the world. But suddenly Rey raised her eyes to mine unsmilingly, but with an expression in them that caused me to dash aside the robe which still hugged me and rise, light hearted, to the occasion and my feet.

Taking off my derby, I made a sweeping bow. "I regret, Cousin Clara and Miss Day, that I can't receive you in the orthodox evening clothes, but you can see for yourselves that such garments as I have on are ample enough to entitle them to be called full dress."

With that I stood forth to view on the floor. As I turned slowly, flapping Bridget's slipper, mud begrimed and draggled, my brow eclipsed by the agent's hat, everybody was convulsed, even Bridget.

"Arrah, now, Mis' Smith," she cried, "and who would iver take such a lookin' mon to be a cousin of yer own!"

"You did just right, Bridget, not to take him in," gasped Clara. "You see, Rob, I expected Eben would come during my absence, and I told the girls they would know him by his white hair. But I expected to get back with Rey before you came. Eben didn't come, and the girls know better than to admit a strange man after dark since the robberies up the river."

"Especially such a looking villain as that!" cried Harold. "I tell you, Miss Day, Rob didn't look like that on the train. He was got up regardless of cost or his relatives' feelings. But that was before he took to stealing umbrellas and spoons, and, by the way"—he turned abruptly on Rey—"what plunder did Betty hand over to you? Has Rob stolen anything of yours?"

Rey smiled and glanced at me uncertainly, but her fingers did not relax their hold on the little box. Meeting my eyes, her own fell, and the color swept up over her round cheeks. "Yes," she replied demurely, "I fear he has."

Harold glanced from one to the other of us suspiciously, but just then Clara claimed his attention, while Betty motioned me back among the shadows.

"He was awful anxious to see into the little box," she whispered, "but I looked out that he didn't. I give it right to her." And in the same breath Betty claimed her reward by adding, "Can't you give me the message tonight, sir?"

I certainly could and did. In my exuberance of spirits that station agent got his pay in full then and there for his outfit. My hearty recommendation even overlooked the fact that both boots and umbrella leaked.

When Betty retired, blushing, I found Rey at my elbow, while Clara, at the back of the carriage, began loading packages into Harold's arms.

Without glancing up, Rey held the little box out to me. "It's yours," she whispered. "Take it."

Willfully misunderstanding her I boldly took possession of the hand, box and all. "Thank you—dear—it's a Christmas gift which I value above rubies."

"Oh, no, no!" she faltered. "I didn't mean—I meant the—the r—box."

But she did not withdraw her hand, and Harold, glancing around just then, let a package slip from his arms. It reached the floor with a crash.

"Oh, you careless stupid!" cried Clara. "Your last hope of a Christmas gift is shattered."

"So I see," responded Harold, with unnecessary and grim emphasis.